



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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CATCH LIMIT CHANGES PROPOSED FOR GULF GROUP KING MACKEREL

NOAA Fisheries has published a proposed rule that would implement changes in the catch specifications for Gulf group king mackerel, as proposed by the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils (Councils). The rule is intended to enhance the economic and social benefits from the Gulf group king mackerel fisheries while rebuilding the stock. NOAA Fisheries welcomes written comments on these proposed changes through November 24, 2000; addresses are provided at the end of this bulletin. Those proposed changes include:

Set total allowable catch (TAC) for Gulf group king mackerel at 10.2 million pounds (MP).

In setting TAC, the Gulf Council considered the comments of its Mackerel Stock Assessment Panel (MSAP), Socioeconomic Panel, Scientific and Statistical Committee, the Mackerel Advisory Panel, public testimony and legal requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. Based on the results of the MSAP evaluations, the range of allowable catch is between 8.2 to 12.8 MP. The Gulf Council chose the mid-point of the range (10.2 MP), which has a 50 percent chance of not exceeding the maximum fishing mortality threshold.

The proposed TAC is a slight reduction from the existing TAC of 10.6 MP. The Gulf Council considers the reduction to 10.2 MP sufficient to allow continued rebuilding of the Gulf group king mackerel stock while minimizing the social and economic impacts of the TAC reduction. Additionally, the stock is benefitting from a reduced fishing mortality

because of bycatch reduction devices in the shrimp fishery, and the 24-inch fork length size limit.

Establish a 2-fish per person per day bag limit on Gulf group king mackerel for the captain and crew of for-hire vessels.

The recreational sector annually exceeded its allocation between 1986 and 1996, and preliminary information for the 1997-1998 fishing year indicated that the recreational sector had again exceeded its allocation, even though the TAC had been increased to 10.6 MP. Therefore, in 1998, the Gulf Council proposed, and NMFS implemented in 1999, a zero-fish bag limit of Gulf group king mackerel for captains and crews of for-hire vessels. Updated and final information on the 1997-1998 fishing year indicated that the recreational sector had not exceeded its 7.21 MP allocation during the fishing year, and subsequently, the recreational sector did not exceed its allocation during the 1998-1999 fishing year. Preliminary information for the 1999-2000 fishing year again indicates that the recreational sector will not exceed its allocation.

Given that the recreational sector is now harvesting Gulf group king mackerel within its allocation, and the results of the 2000 stock assessment indicate that the stock of Gulf group king mackerel is continuing to rebuild, the Gulf Council concluded that it was unnecessary to continue efforts to constrain the recreational harvest through the use of a zero-fish bag limit of Gulf group king mackerel for captains and crews of for-hire vessels, and has proposed to re-instate that bag limit.

Revise the commercial trip limit for Gulf group king mackerel in the Florida east coast subzone of the Eastern Zone (Miami-Dade through Volusia Counties, Florida) to maintain a 50-fish trip limit, except if the quota is not 75 percent filled as of February 1, the trip limit would increase to 75 fish.

The commercial fishery in the Florida east coast subzone of the Eastern Zone requested conservative measures regarding their trip limits to ensure a steady harvest of fish for the entire season. Under these lower trip limits, the fishery has not met its quota on Gulf group king mackerel in eight of the last ten years. The trip limit appears to be one factor restricting the opportunity to harvest the quota. To provide an opportunity for increased social and economic benefits, the South Atlantic Council proposed a more flexible system where the commercial trip limit would increase from 50 to 75 fish on February 1, if no more than 75 percent of the quota had been taken. This action is intended to allow fishermen a greater opportunity to meet their quota, while maintaining stability in the fishery for the majority of the season.

Addresses and Contact Information

Requests for copies of the regulatory amendment, which includes an environmental assessment and a

regulatory impact review, may be obtained from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, Suite 1000, 3018 U.S. Highway 301 North, Tampa, FL 33619; telephone: 813-228-2815; FAX: 813-225-7015; e-mail: gulf.council@noaa.gov.

Written comments on these proposed changes should be sent to Steve Branstetter, Southeast Regional Office, NMFS, 9721 Executive Center Drive, North, St. Petersburg, FL 33702, or FAXED to 727-570-5583. Comments must be received at the appropriate address or FAX number no later than 5:00 p.m., eastern standard time, on November 24, 2000. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via electronic mail or Internet.

NOAA Fisheries will consider all comments received during the comment period and will address all comments in the preamble of the final rule.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Steve Branstetter, 727-570-5305; FAX 727-570-5583; e-mail: steve.branstetter@noaa.gov.

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